

Dear Saints of St Columba's,

There's an idea that to be a community, everyone must think and do exactly the same things. However, that's not the definition of a church. It's the definition of a *cult*.

The people in your family: do they all think exactly the same? Do they all do only the same things? I'm willing to bet, no and no.

We live in a world of diversity. Human genetics requires diversity. That's why we can't marry our siblings or our cousins. We need the genetic diversity of the broad human family. In the same way, diverse *people* express the diversity of God's creativity.

Diversity is good for us and makes us stronger.
Diversity of views is good for the church.

We are nearly at the end of 2023, the Centenary year of St Columba's Presbyterian Church, UPCS, Hatfield. We have grown and diversified *much* over that time. Diversity is a strength. What challenges us is when we have to live and work together within our diversity. I want to see this congregation as a community of God's diverse people. We can truly be the individuals we are – and still be a community.

Community does not mean we must abandon who we are; what community means is to open ourselves up to others so that we can accept and enjoy them for who they are. However you identify yourself; whatever labels or non-labels you give yourself, you can be that. Diversity simply means allowing others the same freedom and rights to be themselves.

The way to do this is via curiosity. Be curious about others. Other cultures. Other languages. People. Genders. Nationalities. Races. Be curious.

I want to share a story with you. My first congregation was an exciting time. On my first day, Peggy Monroe, a dear *tannie*, arrived first to open up for us. We had no children back then. Her welcome was so wonderful! She and Bob were in their 70s and boy, could she tell stories!

After the very first Service, when we got to our little Toyota outside, there was something tucked under the wiper. I took it home to read. There I discovered something quite shocking:

some biblically-minded person had carefully prepared a list of Bible passages "proving" that Christians should stick to their own race groups. Every car outside our church had had the same pamphlets attached.

I have no idea who put it there, but it was clearly aimed at Jenni and myself. It had to be someone 'inside'. Some people never came to church, and some refused to be visited and transferred. It was a painful wake up call in view of it being 1995, when Mandela was president, and everything was Madiba-magic and 'kumba-yah' and rainbow something.

Those experiences have continued to follow me. It's the people who want to know "so where did you grow up?" or "so what culture are you?". Much of it is very subtle; very "nice"; very respectable racism even.

And so in response, I have constantly beaten a drum of diversity and inclusion in the church. I gravitate even now towards inclusive arenas in the Church.

I serve the UPCS on the Ecumenical Relations Committee ERC, the JDDJ Committee, a WCC-driven program to reconcile the divisions of the Reformation, 500 years ago in 1517. I straddle both the UPCS and UCCSA. And I serve on the Church Unity Commission Central Committee.

My response to divisions, to racism, to homophobia even, to patriarchy, has always been to nurture diversity in the church. I wish we could have a motto that says, "A World Church. For You."

Scripture says, where Jesus prays for the Church in, John 17:17 in the Contemporary English Version: "Your word is truth. So, let this truth make them completely yours."

This year we have explored the truth of the Gospel, we have spoken truth, proclaimed the truth of Jesus the Christ, worked with and for the truth, lived the truth.

It has been a hard year, a tough year for us. And yet, always we remember that God has been faithful to St Columba's for 100 years. In many ways, we have been faithful in holding up the truth of God before the world. Our Centenary Annual Church Meeting is therefore a significant milestone. The word of God is truth. "Words of truth endure forever", we say after each public reading of the Scriptures. It remains so for us still today.

But all this does not make the truth always comfortable for us. In fact, quite often, truth is uncomfortable, and makes us uncomfortable. Public worship is the proclamation of truth. Let us remain faithful to Christ, as he has remained faithful to us.

I know some folks who love the Lord but can be very dogmatic. They dislike Christmas decorations and reject many of the symbols of Christmas as "pagan". At the same time, many Christmas traditions go back one thousand five hundred years.

One symbol people react to is "Xmas". 'X' means 'nothing'; the 'unknown', they say. Yes, it does. In Mathematics. However, in Greek, the language of the New Testament, 'X' was used in the early Church as a symbol for Christ Jesus, taken from the first letter, 'X' for *Xristos*/Christ. Many catacombs and ancient sites have X-graffiti scrawled over them.

Thus, "Xmas" is a perfectly legitimate abbreviation. This symbol 'X' is also related to the Greek word for fish, '*iXthus*' – an acronym for "Jesus Christ, Son of God".

So you see, anything can be a symbol. One of the reasons people react to symbols is fear. They fear something is being taken away or furtively slipped in to undermine Christian faith.

What, if instead of fear, we see symbols in **love**? The Bible says, "Love drives out fear." What if we used Love as the lens to see everything through? With love as our lens, we don't have to fear diversity, or symbols, or Xmas, or FISH, or even Christmas trees. Love drives away fear.

This year, we have decorated the church with lights, colours, trees, and symbols of Christmas so that we can celebrate the amazing thing about it all: Christ Jesus comes into the world. Now that's a reason to celebrate without fear. The NT says God sent his Son because he loved us! See love is the lens God sees through too!

God bless you and your loved ones!

Rev Craig
3 December 2023